ALL NATURE SINGS
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PSALM 98

One of the best ideas in the Bible is that nature sings, that there is music of creation all around us, pointing us to God.

One of my favorite things to do is to sit outside after dark surrounded by tall, majestic beech trees and listen. There is a little place in Michigan to which we retreat as frequently as possible I love the city. I love the sounds of the city, the continuous symphony of urban sounds: traffic sounds, the diesel engine of the buses, the roar of fire trucks, the wail of sirens, the honking of cabs, the El rumbling and overhead helicopters and jet liners coming and going. It's a symphony. But I equally love the music of nature – sitting after dark and quietly listening. The best time is as dusk becomes night. The birds sing their finale for the day: from a mile away a few cows moo, overhead Canadian geese make their final pass of the day and honk meaningfully. And after things settle down, if you are really quiet you can hear the hooting of a distant owl – and then a minute later another one – its counterpoint.

Now I know there are scientific explanations for all the music: marking territory, inviting romance, signaling location, warning. But some ……. and ornothologists have hypothesized that some bird songs, for instatnce, is just that – music; that birds sing because they love to sing, love to make music.

The New York Times reviewed a book about it a while ago – and the review was entitled The Great Animal Orchestra. The author wrote about the symphony of animal sounds and asserted that in the wiild animals vocalize with a musical sensitivity to the full scan of the ecosystem.

Well, I don't know about that – but I do love the idea that the creation makes music to praise the creator.

There is a lovely old hymn that has fallen out of fashion because the first line suggests a gender-specific God and theologically we know better than that. "This is my Father's World" – if you can forget the masculine ……..for a minute, the hymn contains some very nice lines.

“All nature sings and around me rings the music of the …” for instance. We sang that hymn a lot in the church of my youth. Also singing that hymn in my church was Paul Winter. I’ve known him all my life. We went to high school together and our families belonged to the same church. Paul became a jazz musician and a good one. And then, along the way he became interested in the music of nature, specifically whale singing and wolf howling. He was among the first to record and analyze the sounds whales make and recognized patterns. The sounds had meaning. They seemed to evoke response from other whales miles away. Paul recorded whale songs, wrote music to accompany it and played his soprano saxophone along with it. He did the same thing with wolf howling. It’s beautiful, mesmerizing. If you listen carefully to Winter’s music you will hear, on occasion, a phrase from hymn he heard as a youngster, which was …. For the Beauty of the Earth. And I have always wondered which part of his inspiration was that linve from that old hymn – “All Nature Sings.”

It is a consistent theme in the Bible. The prophet Isaiah: “you will go out in joy and be led fourth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

Hills singing, trees clapping, whales, wolves, geese, cows, owls – a symphony of sound.

The Psalm fo rth eday, Psalm 98 ……..

> O’ sing to the Lord a new song
> For he has done marvelous things.
> Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the the earth.
> Let the sear roar, let the floods clap their hands
> Let the hilld sing for joy.

And the idea beneath is all is that the creation reveals something of the creator: and the creation responds to the dreator with praise and music and singing.

It’s not an easy concept for people who live at a distance from nature. The great Psalms of praise were written by people who lived close to nature, knew that they had to live in harmony with ature; people who cleared land, plowed, planted, nurtured and harvested their own food. Pleple for whom rain was literally life – giving the season part of a natural ecomony that fed and sustaind them.

You and I get our food from a supermarket, Dominicks, Jewel, Whole Food. We, most of us, have no idea who planted, nurtured and harvested it. It comes from miles away, sometimes continents away, frozen, processed, pumped full of chemicals, shrink wrapped and we throw it in the grocery card without so much as a thought about who grew it, where it came from, and how it got here.

Most religion began with a sense of wonder, awe, and gratitude. Ancient people lived so close to nature, were so dependent on nature that they devised rituals, music, dance to convince nature to be kind, and to thank the creation and the creator for nature's generosity and goodness and beauty. From the beginning of history human beings have looked up into a night sky full of stars, or saw the green trees of summer burst with ……..color, or stood in astonishment at the power of a waterfall, lightening, thunder, storm and experienced awe and wonder, fel the need to express gratitude.

> The Hebrew Psalmists
> O Lord, our Lord.
> How majestic is your name in all the earth.
> When I look at the moon and stars which
> You have created – Who are we? [PS 8]

Give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good.

> Make a joyful noise
> Let the floods clap their hands
> Let the hild sing together for joy [PS 98]

At the heart of Hebrew religion – that became Judaism – that gave birth to Christianity, is the basic conviction that the creation is good, essentially and fundamentaly good: that God created and called creation very good. But under the influence of the Greeks the idea crept into Christianity that maybe the creation was not so good. The Greeks, after all, said that reality is either matter or spirit – and spirit is good, matter not so good. Spriti is holy. Matter is fleshy, sensual, tempting. Spirit is higher – matter lower. It wasn't long until Christians were devising wasy to be spiritual rather than worldly: suggesting that sexuality was exxentially not good apart from its functionality as a means to propogate the race.

Christian Wiman, former editor of *Poetry*, after an …… of decades recently came back to faith and the church. He was interviewed by Krista Tippett on NPR recently. He said, " I was brought up with the ….. notion that you had to renounce the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience

has been just he opposite; a love of the earth and existence so overpowering that it implied, or included or even absolutely demanded, God. Love did not deliver me to the earth, but into it.

Under the influence of that idea that matter is evil, earthiness suspect, the world a place to avoid, western civilization generally has ingnored any sense of responsibility for creation, care for creation, respect for creation. And so we find ourselves perilously clost to an environmental tipping point. When vast and disastrous changes in the ecosystem – caused by human ignorance, human sin – may make the future much less liveable and sustainable for generations that follow us.

A bumper sticker announce " At least the war on the environment is going well."

It is, I would suggest, the number one moral issue: the care of the earth. And yet it is barely on the radar screen in national politics. In fact, environmental sensitivity has become political liability, an object of derision and scorn.

The religion of the Bible invites us to regard the world around us with respot and reverence and gratitutde. We need nothing so much as a conversion experience, a whole new way of thinking about the world. Not simply as a resource to be used and discarded, but as a gift to be valued and treasured.

I wonder how much of this is a result of our lving at such a distance from nature. I wonder how much is a result of the pace at which we live, always in a hurry, scheulde full, frequently behind and trying to catch up. I heard a communication scholar last week say that American young people – that would be you – are speaking faster than anyone in our history. I'm not how sure you can know that, but I know I find myself saying "What? Run that by me again, please" to a lot of people under 30.

I'm guilty myself. I miss a lot of what is right in front o fmy eyes because I'm scanning, not focusing, thinking about the next thing rather than paying attention. I'm perfectly capable of walking through a field in Apirl and not seeing a thing, until my wife says "oh look – at the tiny wildflowers just emerging through the leaves and ground cover." Sure enough – there they are and I hadn't seen a thing.

It's a good reason to read poetry- a poem a day. Poets invite us to slow down – you have to read a poem slowly. The act itself slows us down and demands that we pay attention.

Mary Oliver does it for me. Her poems are about seeing, noticing, awe, wonder, gratitiude.

Here's a few lines from one she calls Praying:

> It doesn't have to be
> the blue iris, it could be
> weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
> small stones; just
> pay attention, then patch
> a few words together and don't try
> to make them elaborate, this isn't
> a contest but the doorway
> into thanks, and a silence in which
> another voice may speak.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, environmental activist, author and poet, recently removed his papers from the University of Kentucky where they were being collected and housed, because of the University's inverstment in energy companies that remove entire mountiantops to get at the coal beneath. Berry walks through the woods and fields of his Kentucky farm and goes home and writes what he calls Sabbath Poem.

> Here's a good one about trees singing,
>
> Slowly, slowly they return
> To the small woodland let alone:
> Great trees, outspreading and upright,
> Apostles of the living light.
>
> Patient as stars, they build in air
> Tier after tier a timbered choir,
> Stout beams upholding weightless grace
> Of song, a blessing on this place.

Psalm 98 affirms a God who created the earth and everything in it, a God who is shown in creation, a God who is praised and adored by the beauty and power and goodness and music of nature.

And so the other time in the Church year when Psalm 98 is read, or sung, is in the liturgy for Christmas Day. A reminder that the God of creation loves the world, the natural world, the world of humankind, human flesh, human ….. and living and loving and striving and working and laughing and playing

and aging and dying. God loves the world, all of it enough to come into it in the life of a young man. What Christianity affirms is that jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the only embodiment and presence of the creator in human history, our history, in human life.

> It won't be long now until we
> Find ourselves humming and singing.
> Joy to the World, the Lord is come
> Let earth receive her king.
> And heaven and nature sing.
>
> Joy to the World
> Let all these songs employ
> While fields and floods,
> Rocks, hils and plains
> Repeat the sounding joy.

So, do find time and space today – every day – to open your eyes, look around and see the goodness of the world which is the goodness of God.

And do find a way to stop talking and be quite and listen …..

All nature sings.

Thanks be to God.